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1 Introduction

This paper proposes a conceptual analysis of borders applied to the examination of forced displacement and its response from a receiving state.¹ It focuses on the case of Syrian refugees in Iraq, a relatively small and understudied population compared to the magnitude of the Syrian refugee crisis in the region and the significance of internal displacement in Iraq.²

Common notions of statehood rely on the idea that borders contain societies and politics within a territory over which the state has exclusive power. It is the exercise of this territorialised power that constitutes one of the most significant expressions of sovereignty which distinguishes modern statehood. (Mann 1984, Ruggie 1993)

Yet, this essay shows that the flight of Syrian refugees to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is the manifestation of dynamics more complex than how a Westphalian ideal type of statehood can explain. These dynamics, thus, motivate a reconceptualization of borders that account with greater precision for the multifaceted nature of cross-border relations and their political and social impact in a refugee host state.

The border between Syria and Iraq was established almost a century ago and Iraqi and Syrian regimes have harshly repressed the consolidation of Kurdish identity and politics for decades. Nevertheless, the displacement of Syrian refugees to KRI shows that relations among Kurds are active across the border on multiple levels, making this a “thin border”.³ Cross-border interactions have become even more significant with the loss of control of the Syrian state over this area, in the context of a weak Iraqi state, and in conjunction with an emboldened Kurdish authority.

The study begins with a definition of the concept of border thinness, which is then used as the analytical framework for a qualitative examination of the Syrian-Iraqi border, especially as concerns the areas populated mostly by Kurds in both countries. It then proceeds with the analysis of a set of semi-structured interviews with policymakers and humanitarian operators engaged in the response to the Syrian refugee crisis in KRI. In this way, this analysis will illustrate the ways in which a thin border functions under conditions of displacement.

The study concludes by observing that representing borders as simple geographical lines fails to portray a reality which cannot be grasped fully through the analytical category of a territorialized state enclosed within elementary borders. The dynamics of displacement that have taken place since the beginning of the Syrian conflict call for an approach mindful of the historical development of the border, its multi-layered structure, and by assessing the extent to which it has a containment capacity of society, politics, and economies within state territory.

Syrian displacement in KRI shows that a thin border has scarce containment capacity. Instead, the relations that connect the two sides of the border have established a shared space for politics, society, and economies. This context of transborder relations has made KRI a likely destination for refugees who could count on political interests, social solidarity, and economic opportunities to smoothen the impact of their presence in KRI. From the perspective of the host government and society, the thin border means that Kurdish Syrian displacement has direct political, social, and economic implications. In particular, the KRG political leadership could frame Syrian Kurdish presence into a discourse of solidarity and pan-Kurdishness that would have not been available otherwise. Although there have been phases of border closure and a severe selectivity towards certain (especially Arab) refugees; these relations made possible by border thinness have set the stage for a relatively receptive response towards refugees making less likely border closures, xenophobia, or the criminalization of migration.

2 Methodology and limitations

The author has carried out 22 technical and elite-level semi-structured interviews in KRI in April 2017. Only some of these interviews are directly quoted in the text. All quotations in the text have been checked and authorized by the interviewees or their public relations offices. Furthermore, the author visited Syrian refugee camps in each of the three Iraqi Kurdish governorates: Erbil (Koushtapa Camp), Dohuk (Domiz 2 Camp) and Suleymaniyya (Arbat Camp). Apart for the case of Koushtapa Camp, Asayish, the internal security forces of the KRG, have constantly attempted to limit access to the camps to the author for reasons that could not be clarified. Nevertheless, the UNHCR has eventually facilitated access and allowed the author to get a sense of the quality of life in camps, the kind of organizations that operate in it, and the regulations to which camp residents are subjected through direct observation and by speaking with camps administrators.

In September 2017 the KRG has held a long-awaited independence referendum that unsurprisingly delivered a positive result. This event has brought about a series of reactions from the central federal government and the neighbouring countries that have undermined the quest for independence of the KDP and weakened the KRG. The economic situation has deteriorated dramatically, and protests have spread across the region against a poor democratic record and its problematic economic policies. These events have affected or will probably affect the Syrian Kurdish refugee population, but they are not accounted for in this article due to their novelty.

Furthermore, while internal displacement in Iraq is dramatic and demographically much more relevant than the question of refugees this research is deliberately focussed on refugees exclusively and not on internally displaced persons as an acknowledged limitation of the study.

3 Rethinking borders

The scholarly debate on borders has been developing across several disciplines focussing on the redefinition of the nature, characteristics, and relevance of an important, yet understudied, institution shaping international politics and society. (Kolossoff 2005, Mezzadra and Neilson 2012, Vaughan-Williams 2008, Kratochwil 1986, Migdal 2004, Agnew 2008) Much of this debate originates from a reflection on the relations between state and territory and investigates the ways in which statehood, and therefore sovereignty, is connected to the exercise of power over a finite geographic space contained by borders.

Scholars as John Ruggie (1993) John Agnew (1994) and Liisa Malkki (1992) have observed from diverse disciplinary perspectives that state territoriality is an assumption often taken for granted and yet deserving far more thorough scrutiny.

Stephen Krasner's analysis of the Westphalian model as a type of statehood observes that the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, conventionally identified as the historical foundation of territorial sovereignty, should be considered more as a reference than a historical turning point. In his view: "the Westphalian model has never been more than a reference point or a convention; it has never been some deeply confining structure from which actors could not escape." (1995, 115)

This is not the place to engage with this debate further; yet criticism towards assumptions of territorial statehood justifies a reconsideration of the concept of borders that goes beyond their identification as lines demarking a geographical territory. Therefore, I adapt and elaborate on a conceptualization of borders as multi-layered entities constituted by *boundaries*, to serve the purposes of the subsequent analysis. Following this definition originally developed by Beatrix Haselberger, (2014) within the discipline of Urban Planning borders are constituted by four main

boundaries: political, social, economic, and natural. Whereas the term border refers to a linear geographical demarcation over and within which the state exercise its power; the boundary is a fuzzier entity enclosing areas of relations between different subcategories constitutive of the border.

A political boundary identifies the area of relations between political actors: for example, parties or political movements. The social boundary demarcates a space of social relations, for example between ethnic groups, kinship, or social organizations as religious networks. The economic boundary refers to the area of economic activities such as trade, industrial areas, or agricultural lands. The natural boundary defines a space through natural physical elements for example rivers, mountains, or plains.

By analysing the state border as constituted by a set of layers, greater complexity emerges on its function of delimitation of state territory. Disaggregating its boundaries throughout a method of “boundary analysis” allows evaluating the containment capability of the border with respect to each of its components. When the boundaries of a border allow for connections, exchanges, and relations then we have a “thin border” which has scant containment capacity. This means that the areas within these boundaries do not map on the territory that is identified by the border. For all kinds of historical circumstances, societies, economies, or politics do not always end where the edge of a state territory is established in the form of a border but can instead continue in the form of relations, cultural connections, languages or trade relations and that may render the border existent but thin.

Conversely, a thick border has the capacity of separating spaces and therefore establishes discontinuity between people and things contained inside and outside the borders. The nature of the border, its containment capacity, influences the way in which transborder phenomena take place, and migrations are among these.

As a working definition let us consider border thinness a set of formal and informal practices, allowing for a sustained flow of things and people. It is important to note that a thin border is not a redundant entity. The fact that it exists, e.g. in the form of customs, borderlines, or crossing points, still denotes a capacity by those in charge of controlling flows across territories at least as much as they have power to do so.

4 The Syrian-Iraqi border as a thin border: a boundary analysis

Given the conceptualization of borders not as simple territorial lines and considering the criticism that territorial conceptions of statehood have raised, an analysis of the Syrian-Iraqi border should consider its constitutive layers including its political, social, economic and natural boundaries.

4.1 Political Boundary

An assessment of the social and political dimension of the Syrian-Iraqi boundary can only begin from its historical formation. Iraq as a territorial entity originates from the broader regional process of state formation of the interwar period. At this time “the new ideological centrality of specifically collective structures (nationally, culturally, or economically defined) for delivering order meant that territorial states in the non-European world now become central to organizing the international sphere.” (Dodge 2003, 6) The establishment of the British Mandate administration of Mesopotamia (1920) entailed the designation of a unified Iraqi geographical entity, which until then was divided into three administrative provinces (Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra). (Tripp 2000, 29)

In the northern and north-western areas of Mosul Province was concentrated a majority of Kurdish speaking population. Contextually with the rise of nationalisms in the rest of the region, Kurdish

elites began to mobilise for an independent Kurdish state, but their efforts were unsuccessful. In 1920 the Treaty of Sèvres included a clause referring to the establishment of a Kurdish state on a territory unifying the areas of Turkey, the French Mandate, and the British Mandate, in which Kurdish languages were spoken. Opposition from Turkish nationalists and the interests of the Mandates' power brought about the abolition of this clause, and the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne (1923) failed to mention the formation of a Kurdish state (Stansfield 2016, 47-48). Thus, populations speaking Kurdish languages were divided between four polities: Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Yet the struggle for Kurdish self-determination has continued until today; although its intensity, methods, and achievements differ from state to state.

In 1932, the Kingdom of Iraq supplanted the British Mandate. In 1946 the Kurdish Democratic Party was founded by leaders including Mulla Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani, and became the main political organisation in Iraq for Kurdish rights and self-determination. Soon, the leaders of the KDP were forced into exile; Barzani went to Tehran and the USA and Talabani went to Syria where he led the foundation of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (1956). (Tejel 2009, 48-49)

Both Syria and Iraq have used Kurdish politics as a means of influence across their borders, and exploited the divisions on tribal, ideological, and social levels among the Kurds to restrain them.

The Syrian regime of Hafez al-Asad pursued a policy of Arabization of the north-eastern area of Syria, mainly populated by Kurds (Tejel 2009, 60-62), but also used Kurdish political groups in Iraq and Turkey to pursue foreign policy objectives. The Kurds were instrumental to Syria's fierce antagonism with the Iraqi Ba'ath. The Patriotic Union Party (PUK), the party that split from the KDP in 1970s, opened its first office in Damascus in 1975 under the leadership of Talabani. According to Jordi Tejel, hundreds of Syrian Kurds suffering from discrimination, deportation, and the stripping of citizenship in their own country joined the Peshmerga forces of Iraq (Tejel 2009, 61;71).

In a similar way, Turkey and Iran established relations with Kurdish parties to project their influence in Iraq and to contrast Kurdish activism within their own states. Kurdish political groups also took advantage of the protection and support of foreign patrons to pursue their agendas. To mention a few examples, Iran supplied weapons to the Peshmerga in the 70s to weaken Iraqi stances over border disputes; during the Iran-Iraq war the KDP established relations with Iran, while the PUK was initially on the Iraqi side before shifting towards Iran (Stansfield 2016, 105; 115-118). Furthermore, the KDP has enjoyed excellent political and economic relations with Turkey, which has allowed to counter the influence of rival political groups including the Kurdish Communist Party (PKK) in conflict with the Turkish regime (Stansfield 2016, 150).

Both the formation of Iraq as a territorial entity and the political forces cutting across the border of Iraq and its neighbours, especially when it comes to the Kurdish question, are indicative of the thin nature of the political boundary. This boundary can hardly contain the activity of political actors operating in their respective states; politics does not end where the state ends, and instead the border constitutes a channel for influence for governments as well Kurdish groups to project power beyond their formal territoriality.

4.2 Social Boundary

Like the nature of political relations, social connections further corroborate the idea of a thin Syria-Iraqi border. The development of the Iraqi state shows how the Syrian-Iraqi border cuts across an area and a population with shared social characteristics. Ethnic identity, language, religion, and social hierarchies, such as tribalism, constitute elements of continuity among Kurdish populations on both sides of the border.

The literature on Kurdish identity points out that a cohesive national identity is not an uncontested phenomenon and internal pluralism within Kurdish society is sharp, sometimes even conflictual, as several wars among Kurdish factions demonstrate. (Dahlman 2002, 276, Tripp 2000, 34-36, Stansfield 2016, 68) Yet the rise of Kurdish nationalism has produced a progressive sense of cohesiveness across different languages, social, and religious groups encompassed under an idea of Kurdishness. Social and cultural homogeneity is particularly consistent in the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish areas given their adjacency.

Kurds from Syria (Rojava Kurds) speak a similar or identical language to the Kurds of North Western Iraq, usually referred to as Bahdini. Whereas most of the Kurds from Syria have received an Arabic education, therefore also speak Arabic, most Kurds in Iraq, especially the younger generations who have not served in the Iraqi Army, speak only Kurdish; although Arabic is the official second language in the Kurdish Region of Iraq.⁴ Kelsey Shanks observes how the education policy of the Kurdish Regional Government is informed by the intent of favouring Kurdish over Arabic in education. Although Arabic is taught in schools, the subject is not taught as well as Kurdish. As she observes: "The KRG has supported both the US and Israel, and correspondingly, English language has taken precedence in the KRG school curriculum. Consequently, the new generation of Iraqi Kurds within the KRI does not possess the same fluency in Arabic as their parents." (Shanks 2016, 430) Perhaps paradoxically, when it comes to linguistic relations, Iraqi Kurds are more closely connected with Syrian Kurds (and the other Kurdish groups in Turkey and Iran) than with their own Arab fellow nationals.

Other connections are religious and tribal social structures. Van Bruinessen highlights that the formation of new borders in the early twentieth century cut through tribal territories. This disrupted the nomadic and transhumant habits of local tribes. In addition, tribal leaders (*aghas*) have often let themselves be co-opted opportunistically by ruling authorities during the Ottoman Empire, in the mandate administrations, and in the new states; this has had the effect of progressively weakening their traditional social role. (Bruinessen 1992, 190-192)

Notwithstanding this, tribal networks have maintained a fundamental role for smugglers of goods and people across borders. Van Bruinessen observes that "the new borders made smuggling an important source of income, and tribes appeared to be appropriate organisations to exploit it – because of their internal solidarity and the strong authority of the chieftain over his followers." (Bruinessen 2001, 19)

Tejel further documents how tribal groups such as the Hasenan, the Miran, and Bawlian in Syria are closely related to the Barzanis. These tribal groups were particularly affected by the withdrawal of citizenship and the establishment of the "Arab Belt" enacted by the Syrian government in their areas, and have tended to find better conditions of living or employment in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example joining the Peshmerga forces (Tejel 2009, 73). The Barzanis remain the most influential kin groups having acquired political leadership and surviving the decline of other tribal groups. According to Hamit Bozarslan "the Barzani family has never confined itself to the Iraqi state frontiers, it has defined them as a tribe, as a religious authority and as a nationalist entity." (Bozarslan 1997)

A third social dimension that cuts across state boundaries is religion but its influence is in decline. The majority of the Kurdish population is Sunni Muslim, adhering to Shafi'i legal tradition, differing from most other Sunni groups in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, who are more commonly Hanafi. Sufism and other mystical religious practices are diffused among the Kurds in the form of networks such as the Naqshabandiya and other religious hierarchies which represent the most distinctive elements of

Islam in Kurdish culture. (Pinto 2010, Tejel 2009, 98-102) Yet similarly to the case of tribalism, religion has been identified as an archaic trait of Kurdish identity by nationalist leaders, which does not fit with the modernization of Kurdish identity. McDowell observes:

For political Kurds in Turkey and elsewhere Islam was associated with traditionalists and conservatives, with *aghas* and landlords. When religious leaders entered the nationalist struggle as in the case of Barzinji in Iraq, they subordinated the language of religion to that of the national struggle. (1992, 9)

This is a point with which van Bruinessen agrees concluding that religious leaders' influence has declined contextually with the rise of Kurdish nationalism (1992, 254-255).

Thus, the nature of the social boundary between Syria and Iraq is mixed and has changed over time. Religion and kinship establish a connection between both sides of the border, but the rise of territorial states and modernist policies of Kurdish nationalism have undermined their relevance.

Peoples on both side of the border share common characteristics, in particular language, religion, and traditional social hierarchies, but of these factors only those that serve the purposes of the Kurdish nationalist project have maintained relevance. Smuggling constitutes an important informal economy⁵ reviving transborder tribal networks. Young Iraqi Kurds are linguistically connected with their Kurdish fellows across the border than with Iraqi Arabs. Language is the strongest transborder link, which also survived the creation of state borders thanks to education policies that reflect Kurdish nationalist interest.

From the point of view of Syrian Kurds, Tejel observes that their relations with Iraqi Kurdistan has changed over time from inward to transregional and "it was inspired by the incontestable reality of the transborder character of the Kurdish question and the understanding, on the part of the Syrian Kurds, that the border was more a common space, in terms of language, tribal affiliation, ethnicity, and family, than a line of separation." (Tejel 2009, 5)

4.3 Economic Boundary

The third part of this boundaries analysis concerns economic relations and questions whether the establishment of state borders has determined a containment of economies within state territorialities. The borders of the Kurdish region of Iraq are important because they are the main crossing point for land-transported goods as well as pipelines coming from and going towards some of the main trade partners of Iraq (See Figures 1, 2, 3, 4). The fact that KRI is both a destination and a transit region for Iraq's trade partners makes the openness of the economic boundary a vital interest. An analysis of IMF trade data between neighbouring countries shows that the main trade partner since 2005 has been Turkey. About thirty percent of total goods imported by Iraq comes from Turkey (Figure 2) which makes it the second country of origin for imports, coming only after China. On the other hand, Turkey plays a marginal role as destination for exports that is mostly oil. (Figure 4)

Syria played a significant role as an exporter to Iraq at least until 2011, when imports of Syrian origin represented ten to fifteen percent of the total goods imported by Iraq and made Syria among the top three exporters to Iraq after Turkey and China, (Figure 2) the latter having gained influence after 2011. Iraqi exports to Syria however have been limited.⁶

These data highlight that the Kurdish region enjoys a key role due to its location between two main trade partners for Iraq, although in the case of Syria there are also alternative crossing points in non-Kurdish Iraqi territory. Yet, there are limitations to be considered. The data aggregates Iraqi and

Kurdish statistics. According to estimates by the World Bank, the KRI is the destination of about one third of the total imports from Turkey, which makes it the main trade partner of the KRG. This is not surprising, given the close relationship between the KDP, the KRG, and the Turkish government (World Bank 2015). As concerns the imports from Syria, it is less clear the extent to which they are concentrated in KRI, since official data is not available.

The other limitation relates to informal economies. It was already mentioned that smuggling networks are considered a very important economic resource for the local population. Although there is no reliable data, the importance of this activity increases the considerable amount of formal exchange of goods across the border.

Reviewing the phases of Kurdish economy in Iraq, Gareth Stansfield highlights how the Kurdish region has experienced massive destruction, especially from Hussein's regime, but has capitalized on the sanction regime of the 90s. Its transborder relations have been a crucial resource to stabilize and develop the Kurdish economy, primarily to the benefit of the two main political groups the PUK and the KDP. In this respect, Stansfield documents the importance of revenues generated by customs and taxation especially in the Faysh Khabour border crossing between the KRI and Turkey (Stansfield 2003, 51).

Notwithstanding the approximation of data, all elements concerning the nature of the economic boundary of the Kurdish region denote a regime of formal and informal openness due to the important economic role that both Syria and especially Turkey have played in the economy of this region. This leads to the conclusion that the economic boundary does not have a containment function and facilitates transactions between trade partners and therefore can be considered thin.

4.4 Natural Boundary

Finally, due consideration is given to the natural boundary. A common motto in Kurdish folklore says that "Kurds have no friends but the mountains" (Bulloch and Morris 1992). The saying epitomizes the history of repression and isolation that Kurds have experienced but also refers to the geographic nature of the area where most Kurdish speaking populations are concentrated. Historically, the Kurdish population has concentrated in mountainous areas because this terrain offers defensive advantage. Consequently, the border of the Kurdish region with Syria, Turkey, and Iran are mostly characterized by a rugged orographic geography. Furthermore, the Syrian-Iraqi border in the Kurdish region straddles along the bed of the river Tigris. A mountainous natural boundary has a double effect. Whereas it is true that mountains and valleys add to the costs of infrastructures and transports for border facilities, an impervious geographical area renders policing more difficult, facilitating informal crossings and smuggling. As regards the border with Syria, in 2013 the KRG has built a pontoon bridge on the river Tigris (Arafat 2017a) that has connected the two shores, opening the way for Syrian-Iraqi crossings in the Kurdish region.

Overall, the natural boundary of the Kurdish border may appear in contrast with an idea of boundary thinness. The mountainous region has constituted a source of protection for the Kurdish population through its containment capacity, but its natural conformation also facilitates smuggling and informal crossings, thus at least in part contributing to a more fluid border situation difficult to control by state authorities.

Based on four boundary levels, the analysis of the border of Iraqi Kurdistan with Syria shows that the political, social, economic, and natural dimensions of this border generally fit the definition of a thin border. The intense transborder political activity, the social connections that Kurds share on the linguistic and cultural levels, the importance of trade with neighbours, and the nature of the terrain

lead to an assessment of the border of Iraqi Kurdistan with Syria as a thin border. Instead of falling where the territorial border of the state is formally located, the constitutive boundaries of the border demarcate spaces of interaction that challenge the containment capacity of the border.

Notwithstanding the initial project of establishing state-like polities reflecting a fully Westphalian character of state territorialization, this case shows that this process has only in part achieved the objective. Especially when it comes to the Kurdish question in Syria and in Iraq, politics, society, and economies do not end where borders are mapped; in conjunction with the collapse of the Syrian state and the crisis of Iraq, these transborder dynamics have played a greater role in shaping the patterns of refugee displacement as well as the response to it by the host government and society.

5 The functioning of border thinness under circumstances of forced displacement

Migrations and forced migrations are phenomena with which the Kurdish population is familiar, both at the sending and receiving ends. The history of Kurdish repression has caused cross-border and internal displacement on several occasions. Most recently, tens of thousands of Syrians have relocated from Syria to the KRI due to the conflict that followed the peaceful uprisings against Bashar al-Asad's regime.

Displacement from Syria peaked in 2013 and 2014, when the number of Syrians in Iraq reached 200,000. In 2016, Syrian refugees were 250,000; sixty percent of them came from the Syrian region of al-Hasaka, twenty five percent from Aleppo, and ten percent from Damascus. Almost all refugees are of Kurdish origins and they relocated within KRI. Syrian refugees of Arab background in Iraq (who are a few thousand) have relocated in areas different from KRI. For Arab Syrians it was difficult or impossible to cross the border with the KRI, due to restrictions both on the Syrian and KRI side of the border.⁷

The Syrian refugee emergency in KRI has happened in conjunction with the internal displacement crisis caused by the expansion of the Islamic State organization and its occupation of parts of Nineveh Province in 2014. Even though refugee presence from Syria represents a five percent increase of the population in less than three years and overlapped with a daunting domestic situation, it has not caused the political or social reactions which often result from mass migration such as xenophobia, border closure, or even conflict.

The thinness of the border between Syria, especially Kurdish Syria, and the KRI has provided the conditions for a fast and demographically significant transfer of population followed by a receptive response from social and political actors. It follows a boundaries analysis of this phenomenon of displacement which illustrates how a thin border has performed under the pressure of a humanitarian crisis by facilitating people's crossing and a receptive social, political, and economic response.

5.1 Political Boundary

From the point of view of the political boundary, the beginning of the crisis in Syria has caused concerns among Kurdish authorities in Iraq. Aware that the Kurdish population of Syria is particularly vulnerable, the KRG has attempted to mediate between Kurdish factions in Syria to reach a unified Kurdish stance in the interest of security, but also considering the 2011 uprisings as a possibility for the realization of at least some of the Kurdish objectives in the country.

Falah Mustafa, head of the Department for Foreign Relations of the KRG, described the situation as follows:

As for the “Arab Spring”, it was people’s demand for a transition to democracy, freedom, and rule of law. Syria is an important case for us in the KRG as we share a border and therefore their stability and security have direct impact on us. Due to the fact that Syria also has a Kurdish population, the transition to democracy in Syria is of significance to us and what we want to ensure is that our brothers are given their well-deserved legitimate rights. Unfortunately, democracy and stability in Syria were not achieved due to obvious reasons. The leadership in Kurdistan Region of Iraq has remained firm on their message to our brothers in Syria; to remain united, have a clear vision for their future, and be cautious in their stance. (Bakir 2017)

The Head of Foreign Relations of the KDP Hoshyar Siwaily emphasised the risks related to the nature of developments in Syria:

At the beginning, we saw this as a threat to the Kurds, living in Syria, and that grew especially when DAESH/ISIS began to invade many parts of Syrian Kurdistan. Including Kobane, as you know, so at the beginning there was a threat, there was not much fighting between the Syrian government and the Kurds; still there is not much fight between these two parts, the main fighting was between the Kurds and “DAESH”, so at the beginning there was no clear position how to react to this situation, but when “DAESH” invaded the area the position of KDP and Kurds was clear, which was that “DAESH” was a threat.

Sadi Ahmed Pire, member of the politburo of the PUK illustrated that Iraqi Kurdish relations with Syria have a history, and already on the occasion of clashes between Syrian Kurds and the government in Syria of 2004,⁸ PUK leader Jalal Talabani played a mediation role in the interest of Kurdish safety and rights. Also on that occasion a refugee camp for Syrian Kurds was set up on the border between Syria and KRI, interestingly Pire claimed that this was “so that the political uprising in Syria could be made a political case”. Pire recalls that even before the fall of Saddam, Kurdish delegations including Talabani paid visits to Damascus to advocate for Kurdish rights in Syria, especially concerning citizenship and cultural rights (Pire 2017). All political representatives have indicated how the Syrian developments have caused both expectations and concerns confirming the political interdependence between the two sides of the borders.

Thus, the KRG has attempted to facilitate the formation of a unified Kurdish stance by convening meetings among Syrian Kurdish factions⁹ known as “Hewler 1” in 2012, (Carnegie Endowment 2012) “Hewler 2” in 2013, and “Dohuk 1” in 2014. Committees were formed by representatives of each party to deal with different issues relating to the crisis and to establish an increased administrative and security presence in the Syrian Kurdish Territory (Pire 2017). Some of the decisions that were made concerned the management of the border and its openness for Kurds to cross to Iraq. Another controversial decision was the creation of a security force, the Rojava Peshmerga, drawn from the Syrian Kurdish refugee population, to be trained militarily and subsequently operate in the Syrian Kurdish areas (Siwaily 2017).

Nevertheless, this mediation effort failed because divisions among Kurdish factions deepened.¹⁰ Pire of the PUK pointed out that the breaking point was when President Barzani charged a KDP official instead of a government representative to deal with relations with Syrian Kurdish groups. This reinforced doubts that the KRG’s role in Syria was more directed at expanding KDP influence to this area than defending Kurdish interests at large. Eventually, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) secured control over most Kurdish areas in Syria and sparked Turkey’s intervention due to its ties with Turkey’s enemy PKK.¹¹ The KDP and the KRG had excellent relations with the Turkish government and had been at odds with the PYD. As a result, the Rojava Peshmerga were not deployed in Syria,

while the PYD expanded its control over the Syrian Kurdish area through its armed force, the YPG (People Protection Unit). The division between the PYD and KDP was also epitomized by the intervention of the former in the border area of Sinjar with frequent trespassing on the Iraqi side of the border and causing tensions with the KDP and its forces.

Notwithstanding these political divisions, the KRG and its counterparts in Syria have allowed for a relatively smooth border crossing for Kurdish Syrians to Iraq, although on at least two occasions in 2013 and in 2016 the border was temporarily closed (Glioti 2013, Arafat 2017a) as a retaliatory measure towards PYD's (and PKK's) operations in Sinjar (International Crisis Group 2017b).¹²

Syrian Kurds have been able to cross the border and acquire a fifteen-day visa in KRI while undergoing a registration process with the KRI Ministry of Interior. Once obtained clearance from the security services Asayish, the refugees have been able to register with UNHCR and have been provided with an annually renewable residency permit which is valid *only* within the KRI. In 2017, thirty eight percent of the population was living in the nine purposely-built camps distributed across the three provinces of the KRI, the rest settled in private accommodations.¹³

Hoshang Mohamed, who at the beginning of the crisis was in charge of humanitarian affairs at the KRG Department of Foreign Relations (DFR), explained that:

At that time, we had less issues because we did not have a financial and economic crisis, and even, we would not have help from Baghdad [the Federal Government of Iraq]. So, then, in two years, 2012 and 2013, ninety million USD was allocated from KRG's budget to support the Syrian refugees. (Mohamed 2017)

In this initial phase, most of the response to the crisis has been in the hands of provincial administrations, especially in Dohuk, the area closer to the border where most refugees arrived. Subsequently, the KRG set up the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre under the KRG Ministry of Interior in 2014. At this point, the economic situation worsened. As Mohamed recalls:

In 2014, the budget cut from Baghdad and then the drop in oil prices, the costly war with ISIS, and new influxes of internally displaced people, all of these factors contributed to the hardship and worsening of the economic, financial, and security situation; and this has affected not only the Syrian refugees, but at that time we also had 1.6 million Iraqi IDPs in the KRI. (Mohamed 2017)

Yet, political and governmental representatives are unanimous in claiming that they were open to the arrival of Syrian Kurdish refugees. Siwaily of KDP stated that:

Kurdistan is the homeland of the Kurds; we are not hosting Kurds only from Syria but also from Turkey and Iran. So our borders are open to the Kurds wherever they are and wherever they face a threat, and that is what happened with Syria when we opened the border with Syria, with Turkey, with Iran, and many Kurds arrived. For example, Makhmour camp, which is full of refugees from Turkey. (Siwaily 2017)

Mustafa of the KRG explained that:

The KRG, in regard to the displacement of millions of refugees and IDPs, pursued an open-door policy as we fully understand what it means to be helpless and displaced, having lived the experience ourselves. For that reason, we intensified our efforts to ensure welfare and the rights of the IDPs and Refugees who sought shelter in our Region, this was done through

facilitating the registration process and their freedom of movement, and also by providing residency and work permits. (Bakir 2017)

Similarly Pire, from the different political perspective of the PUK, was clear in this respect:

Regarding refugees and political refugees, here we are very open. Because we have experienced the same situation before in Iran and in Europe, and many many Peshmerga people... I am sure that in every house [of Kurdistan] there was at least one single person as a refugee from Turkey or Iran. Therefore, to accept a refugee here, in your house to give them a room, is very common. I think... If you had the [number of] refugees that we have here now, in Italy you would complain; there is no discussion about that.

Here, no-one discusses it, it would be very normal if we cut from each person or two, one percent... two percent [of income], to provide [for the needs of refugees]. (Pire 2017)

Thus, the political boundary under the pressure of the Syrian crisis, shows its thinness on multiple levels. Firstly, the KRG, Kurdish political groups in Syria and in Iraq have attempted to coordinate a response to the crisis thus showing a direct political network across the border. Secondly, the response to refugees' presence was framed within a discourse of transborder Kurdish identity between Syria, Iraq, and regionally resonating with pan-Kurdish stances. The memory of a past of forced migrations produced a sense of responsibility towards other Kurdish populations and justified a response towards the refugees in a political discourse that cuts across different political factions and governmental officers. The thinness of the political boundary has allowed for an official stance of transborder solidarity to frame a receptive response towards Kurdish refugees from Syria although, in other respects, the Kurdish political groups differed sharply and eventually clashed. Finally, notwithstanding the political differences between different Kurdish factions, it is important to notice that all parties involved have operated across the border also when clashing with each other for example in the case of PYD-PKK intervention in the Sinjar area or in KDP's support for friendly factions in Rojava. Such cases further illustrate the thinness of the political boundary.¹⁴

5.2 Social Boundary

At the social level, border thinness also shapes the dynamics of Syrian displacement in KRI. Language, ethnicity, and -to a lesser extent- family relations, have all been mentioned as elements of connection between refugees and the host population facilitating a receptive attitude towards the displaced. Interviewees have often mentioned the role of family relations. Siwaily for example observed:

The story is that, even during the Ottoman Empire, there was no border between Kurdish areas, even Syria did not exist at that time. So, the kind of border control that was imposed after the First World War, did limit the movement between these countries. It limited the movement of the Kurds between Iran and Iraq, there was great movements especially by major tribes, especially in the mountains. After that, the border did limit the movement across the borders, but it did not stop the relations because there are families on both sides of the countries. [...] I do not have any statistics but I myself come from the region of Suleymania, on the border between Iran and Iraq and I personally know many people who have relatives across the border. So, that did not stop the movement of social relations across the border. (Siwaily 2017)

Speaking of social reactions at the horizontal level Hoshang Mohamed, the head of JCCC, observed that:

The public played a very critical role in supporting and accommodating the Syrian refugees, we were financially well... in a good shape; and the public contributed with in-kind material, I can tell you, when the campaign was started by local NGOs, hundreds of tons of food and material were given to refugees. (Mohamed 2017)

Vian al-Rashed Younes, responsible for external relations of Erbil Governorate has confirmed the importance of the ethnic connection:

In terms of social cohesion this [the Kurdish identity of refugees] has been better, for us. Although there have been problems with the education process. For example, I do not know who did this, but at some point the international organizations have suggested that education should be in Arabic for the Syrian Kurds, and the refugees wanted this, so that when they go back they can go back to the local schools. I think this has been a mistake; I do not know who is responsible for this, but I think is a mistake because if you are a Syrian refugee, say, in Germany, then you would study German. So, it should be the same here. Maybe at the secondary education level you could do also teach Arabic, but for the elementary level the education should be the local education. (Younes 2017)

This brings to the fore the question of language, mentioned in the previous section. As Al-Rasheed points out, it plays an important role in terms of refugees' "integration", but from another angle language homogeneity is an item on the political agenda of Kurdistan. It shall not surprise then that the local administration seems keener on cultivating this element of social and cultural continuity.

The fact that a social connection between the Iraqi Kurds and Syrians is important is also attested by the way in which the international and national response has reacted to Syrian presence. An official of a UN agency for example highlighted that:

the KRG is our natural counterpart for the crisis. The Federal Government considers the crisis primarily a KRG issue, because at the time there was not a single refugee from Syria that was out of the KRG. Only a few number of Syrian refugees went south. [This] is because of the ethnicity of Syrians. The people that went to Iraq are mostly Syrian Kurds, so there is some kind of ethnical connection. So the Syrians that have Arab origins go to other places or even other countries, (Jordan, Lebanon...)(Anonymous 2017)

al-Rasheed made a similar point but from a critical angle:

The fact that these are Kurdish Syrian refugees meant that both the central government [the Federal Government of Iraq] and the international community do not care about this issue. We have been to conferences in which states like Lebanon, Turkey, or Jordan received funds for their country because of Syrian refugees. We did not benefit as much, but 240,000 refugees is a big number for three governorates as Erbil, Dohuk, and Suleimaniyya. For the same reason, Baghdad [the Federal Government of Iraq] had not helped us with the crisis. They don't care, because they are Kurds. But also about the Arab Syrians... They don't care. (Younes 2017)

Gathering views from practitioners and policymakers experiencing the Syrian refugee crisis in KRI, and seeing it unfold across the border between Syria and Iraq, shows the ways in which the thin social boundary plays a role in shaping displacement and its response. Language, ethnic identity, and family relations are all factors used to justify, at least rhetorically, a sense of empathy and a horizontal connection between refugees and the host population that overrides the divisive capacity

of the formal Syrian-Iraqi border. As a result, not only at the political level were there interests and willingness to adopt a receptive stance towards refugees, but also at a social level these decisions could be sustained by a perception of common identity, language, and culture between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.

The identification of Syrian refugees as Kurds is also considered a cause of isolation from other regional and domestic dynamics, which privilege the needs and interests of the Arab displaced population. This leads to the consideration that, when it comes to social connections, the social boundary between Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish regions is thinner than between Kurds and Iraqis; the identification of a social Kurdish space engenders a more empathic bond across the Syrian-KRI border than between Kurds and Arabs at large.

5.3 Economic Boundary

A similar pattern emerges when we consider the economic boundary. As highlighted before, transborder economic relations of the KRI represent an important factor in the local and national economy, although much of these transactions happen informally and information remains approximate. Available trade data (see Figures 1 and 2) illustrate that exports of goods from Syria to Iraq has dramatically decreased with the beginning of the crisis in Syria for obvious reasons. Yet, in several interviews, the economic nature of transborder relations has appeared as an element influencing the dynamics of displacement from Syria, especially as concerns the labour market.

Already before the beginning of the crisis, KRI was a destination for Syrians and Syrian Kurds in particular, who could benefit economically by doing business with this oil-rich region or providing labour force. Syrians have a reputation of hard-working individuals. According to the head of the IOM Office of Dohuk: “There have been many Syrian workers working in Iraq before. They are considered hard workers and they have a good reputation for this, they are employed in sectors such as food, construction, carpentry and sweets-making, for example.” (Haso 2017)

Hoshyar Siwali of the KDP confirms that even before 2011 “they [Syrian Kurds] were coming here, but not to the extent, of course, which we have seen after 2011, when the civil war broke out. But there was that kind of movement.” (Siwaily 2017)

This is indicative of how the thin economic boundary between Syria and KRI has constituted a pattern for Syrian Kurds to relocate to KRI after 2011. The KRG has not interfered with the possibility of Syrians working in KRI, allowing them to access the local labour market. Access to the job market happens informally, but on several occasions, it was confirmed to the author that informality is the norm also for the autochthonous population. Refugees’ integration in the local labour market is even surprising to an extent. In the governorate of Dohuk, which hosts the majority of the refugees, seventy-five percent of the male adult refugee population is employed. This figure is even higher than the employment rate of the local population. (UNHCR 2016, 31) ¹⁵

In a conversation, Omer Khider, Head of Research of Irbil Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has claimed that Syrian refugees have become part of the local workforce and their integration is more successful than the integration of internally displaced Iraqis. A survey that the Chamber of Commerce and Industries carried out with one hundred companies and commercial activities operating in KRI shed light on the nature of the economic integration of refugees in the KRI. According to the survey, eighty percent of the employers find the skills of refugees and IDPs matching their needs. Yet, the remaining twenty percent who is unsatisfied with the skills of the employees indicates that the main reason to exclude IDPs from employment is language. According to eighty six percent of the surveyed population, language is an obstacle for the employment of

IDPs. Other obstacles for the employment of IDPs relate to the fact that many are not provided with residency permits and do not have security clearance by the Kurdish security forces, thus making their employment more unlikely. (Adbulla and Khyder 2016, 6-8)¹⁶ Finally, asked about the perceived impact on security of IDPs and refugees sixty eight percent of the interviewees have declared that they see IDPs as negatively impacting on security, while only twenty eight percent considered refugees as having a negative impact on security in Kurdistan.

In addition to the exchange of labour relations across the economic boundary, the importance of smuggling as an informal economic phenomenon was previously mentioned. This aspect has also occasionally emerged in some interviews. Sadi Pire of the PUK has for example observed that “smuggling across the border by Semelka from the PKK and KDP smugglers is actually wonderful because every part has a benefit from it. The loser is the KRG because they cannot control [it].” (Pire 2017) Bahjat Bashir of KDP-Syria (Al-Party), reports that human trafficking and smuggling of refugees to Iraq has become a profitable economic activity. (Bashir 2017) Other sources indicate that the economic relations between Rojava Kurdistan in Syria and the KRI have been flourishing due to business and real estate value fluctuations in Syria during the conflict. Hisham Arafat, a journalist operating in Rojava Kurdistan during the crisis, observes that the establishment of a new crossing directly between Syria and KRI has revived economic relations, and the KRI has become a key source of primary goods, especially in the construction sector for companies operating in Kurdish Syria. (Arafat 2017a) The importance of trade between KRI and Rojava has increased at times in which IS occupied areas cut out Kurdish areas from the main economic centres of Syria, such as Aleppo and Damascus; once IS has been removed from these areas the crossing of Faysh Khabour has become less busy although still relevant. (Arafat 2017b)

The intense exchange of labour force, its relatively successful integration in the local economic context, and the advantage that Syrian Kurds enjoy over Iraqi IDPs are indicators of how at times of multiple humanitarian emergencies, the thinness of the economic boundary between Syria and the Iraqi Kurds areas has influenced the modes of displacement and the response of the local society and administration. Refugees benefitted from their employability in KRI, while local government and private sector capitalized on the increased supply in labour and the possibility to integrate these workers through culture, language, and security perceptions into the local market.

5.4 Natural Boundary

A final consideration should be mentioned with regard to the natural boundary between Syria and Iraqi Kurdish areas. The obstacle of border-crossing due to the presence of the river Tigris on the border has been, at least in part bypassed, with the building of an artificial pontoon to allow for the easier transition across the border. According to Arafat, Faysh Khabur has never been an official crossing point and has only become semi-official between KRI and “Rojava” recently (Arafat 2017b) (Arafat 2017a). On the 16 January 2013, at a time in which Syrian displacement to Iraq was growing steadily, the pontoon bridge was built allowing for faster transfer of goods and people. This has modified the natural boundary between the two areas facilitating cross-border activities.

These considerations show how the modes of displacement and its local response have been influenced by the character of the social, political, economic, and natural boundaries constitutive of the Syrian-KRI border. A thin border has provided the conditions for a fast transfer of a considerable amount of people across the border and a receptive response to their presence in KRI. Social, political, and economic aspects have converged in softening the divisive capacity of the Syrian-Iraqi border of Kurdistan. Notwithstanding sharp divergences, political groups could “frame” their receptive stance towards refugees into a narrative of responsibility towards other Kurds. At the

social level, language homogeneity and a shared memory of forced displacement, provided a connection that facilitated integration and social cohesion. Economically, Kurdish Syrians matched Iraqi Kurdish labour demands and enjoyed the advantage of higher trust and language over Iraqi IDPs. All these aspects converged also at the level of the natural boundary that was modified to facilitate people and goods transfer across the border.

6 Conclusions

Initially, it was observed that categories that represent politics and society, as contained into a linear representation of state borders, do not provide satisfactory analytical depth for the complexity of phenomena such as forced migrations. Thus, border thinness has been proposed to rethink borders as constituted by layers which, to different extents, determine their containment capacity. The analysis of each of the boundaries of the border between Syria and Iraqi Kurdish regions has highlighted the web of relations which cuts across these states. This led to the assessment that there is a space of shared relations between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, which transcends Iraqi and Syrian territoriality and renders this border thin.

The forced displacement of Syrians to Iraqi Kurdistan has generated dynamics that reflect the thinness of the border. The views of local policymakers, administrators, and humanitarian operators highlight, at least rhetorically, the convergence of a sense of political responsibility, social solidarity, and economic interests to address the humanitarian question posed by Kurdish refugees' presence. This convergence has been made possible by the relational space between Syria and Iraq and has produced the conditions "to frame"¹⁷ in public discourse a receptive stance towards Syrian refugees in KRI. A thin border between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish areas has been a way to mitigate the containment capacity of national territorialities in contrast with Kurdish identity and reinforce the idea of a Kurdish unified space.

A counterfactual consideration is that for Arab Syrians, crossing the border with KRI has been a difficult or impossible task; while for internally displaced Iraqis their relocation to KRI was met with obstacles such as language, security concerns, and limitations to their possibility of leaving the camps where they have been hosted¹⁸. One interviewee working for a humanitarian organization even claimed that "it's almost a running joke among practitioners: in KRI refugees are treated as IDPs and IDPs as refugees."¹⁹ This epitomizes how the situation of Syrian Kurdish refugees is influenced by the nature of its relations to KRI while, paradoxically, other internally displaced Iraqis had to experience forms of bordering and isolation because of their disconnection from the Kurdish social and political space. Consistently with the political objectives of the KRG, the response of the refugee crisis compared to the IDP crisis is indicative of a thinning of the Kurdish border between Syria and Iraq, but border practices between KRI and the rest of Iraq have become more discriminative and selective making this border "thicker".²⁰

Rethinking borders in the terms presented in this study does not lead to the conclusion that they are in decline, redundant, or obsolete. Instead, it is their nature, quality, and function that change. As it was seen, the Syrian-Iraqi border was closed at times, and groups such as Arabs or young males were subject to higher scrutiny or discrimination, so even a thin border retains a "filtering" function (Lynch and Brand 2017).

Limitedly to the historical and social context under analysis then, reconceptualising borders in a way that departs from a Westphalian ideal type, provides a more thorough analytical perspective on dynamics of migration which are otherwise ignored by views that rely solely on state territoriality as unit of analysis. Society, politics, and economics seldom end in the same place where state

territoriality ends; instead they can continue as a fabric of relations, interactions, and therefore spaces that establish patterns for transborder dynamics of migrations.

7 Policy Considerations

This study calls for greater awareness from policymakers of the historical nature of borders, their multilayered structure, and their variable degree of containment capacity of displacement and their effective capacity to regulate people movement.

Border thinness can be operationalized as a qualitative analytical category to develop scenarios of modes and intensities of displacement and anticipate the responses that these may generate in receiving states. Where migrations or forced displacements take place across thin borders, more receptive attitudes can be plausibly expected, while the intensity and speed of displacement will be higher. Conversely, thick borders which have greater capacity of containment, are likely to generate more hostile attitudes towards migratory phenomena.

Awareness of these trends can facilitate policy design that is more receptive towards the particularity of local realities and thus avoids “one-size-fits-all” approaches. On the basis of this conceptualization of borders, Operators in the humanitarian sectors, can develop more accurate representations of networks and relations that influence displacement dynamics by relying on a model that goes beyond generic assumptions of state territoriality.

For example, while most maps represent space as mainly divided by state borders; this analysis has shown that displacement moves along patterns that rely on different relational networks which consequently inform the decisions of the host state towards the displaced population. These aspects are seldom represented in maps or reported in textual analyses which instead rely on a linear representation of state borders as the main unit of space partition. The concept of border thinness may be a way to develop alternative or complementary representations of space which can represent with greater accuracy the role of borders in situations of displacement and their effect in shaping people’s movement .

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² As of 2017, Syrian refugees were about six million, and a roughly equivalent figure concerns internally displaced Syrians. Internal displacement in Iraq interests three to four million individuals. Sources UNHCR and IOM.

³ The author has elaborated on the concept of border thinness with regard to Lebanon also in (Dionigi 2017).

⁴ For the official stance of the KRG on the Kurdish language see (Kurdish Regional Government)

⁵ Van Bruinessen claims that smuggling is probably the third main economic sector for Kurdish economy. (Bruinessen 1992, 190)

⁶ For the data mentioned here see data.imf.org/dot under the section “country tables”.

⁷ Sources who prefer to remain anonymous have pointed out that both the Iraqi Kurdish Security “Asaysh” as well as Kurdish groups in Syria have posed serious limits to border crossing to Arabs in general or to male Syrian Kurds of young age. In the first case Arabs have been discriminated against for ethnic reasons, in the second cases Syrian Kurds have been expected to join local armed groups or anyway engage in the Syrian conflict.

⁸ For an account of these clashes see (Tejel 2009)

⁹ These included the YPG, the KDPS, the Progressive Democratic Party, the YKT and others.

¹⁰ For an account of how the Syrian events divided politically the Kurds but also unified them at the grassroots level see (Kaya and Whiting 2017).

¹¹ On PYD relations with PKK and its regional implications see (Lowe 2016)

¹² More recently the Syrian Kurdish authorities have set up a more formalised crossing system for Kurds in Semalka/Feysh-Khabur. See (Arafat 2017c). See also endnote 8 above.

¹³ The main exceptions to this process concern male Kurdish refugees in fighting age whom have been discriminated against at the border either on the Syrian or Kurdish side for security concerns or because they were expected to partake in the

¹⁴ The author is grateful to Reviewer 1 of this article for highlighting this aspect.

¹⁵ The statistic is similar also in the other Kurdish governorates.

¹⁶ The author is grateful to Omer Khider of the Erbil Chamber of Commerce and Industries for his availability to share this survey.

¹⁷ I refer here to the concept of “framing” as developed in Social Movement Theory, see (Snow 2013)

¹⁸ IDPs settled in camps in the aftermath of the 2016-2017 military operations in Mosul were not allowed to leave the camps on the basis of presumed security reasons.

¹⁹ The interviewee prefers to remain anonymous.

²⁰ This also applies in a reverse perspective for example if we consider that the residency card provided by the KRG to Syrian refugees is not recognized in non-KRG territories of Iraq. Furthermore, consider the question of the Disputed Internal Borders, as a further divisive element on the domestic front. (International Crisis Group 2017a)